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เก็บการทำครัวไว้ที่ด่านหน้าของการเปลี่ยนผ่านด้านโภชนาการที่รอยต่อของชนบทกับเมือง: วัฒนธรรมอาหารของแรงงานเขมรในโรงงาน

Keeping cuisine at the forefront of the rural-urban dietary transition: Food culture among Cambodian factory workers

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้จัดทำขึ้นจากรายงานพหุภาคีจากภาครัฐ และองค์การนอกภาครัฐ ร่วมกับเอกสารวิชาการที่เกี่ยวข้อง เพื่อค้นหาระบบโภชนาการและการจัดหาอาหารที่มีอยู่ว่าสามารถมีบทบาทในการปรับปรุงสุขภาวะของคนทำงานได้อย่างไร การวิจัยเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณนาถูกนำมาใช้เพื่ออธิบายว่าเหตุใดมีข้อสรุปที่ขัดแย้งกันในเอกสารข้างต้น ซึ่งเกิดจากการศึกษาขอบเขตของข้อมูลที่ไม่ครอบคลุมด้วยการประเมินโครงการด้วยวิธีการวิจัยเชิงเทคนิค งานชิ้นนี้ได้จัดทำจากการวิจัยพื้นฐานผ่านการศึกษาหลายรูปแบบเพื่อประเมินความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างรูปแบบฤติกรรมกับผลลัพธ์ของการบริโภคอาหาร ทั้งนี้ ใช้การตรวจสอบข้อมูลแบบสามเส้าด้วยการสังเกตุการณ์อย่างมีส่วนร่วม ร่วมกับการบันทึกการบริโภคอาหารระยะยาวที่เน้นทักษะการทำอาหารและสภาพแวดล้อมด้านอาหารในชีวิตประจำวันของแรงงาน ระบบอาหารที่พัฒนาไปกับโรงงานที่มีความหนาแน่นในเขตเมืองของกรุงพนมเปญไม่ได้มีความสมบูรณ์แบบในแง่ของสุขอนามัย แต่ระบบดังกล่าวถูกพัฒนาขึ้นตามความต้องการของแรงงานแบบมีส่วนร่วมมามากว่าสองทศวรรษ ในขณะที่การแทรกแซงภายนอก อาทิ โรงอาหาร แม้จะสามารถเพิ่มผลลัพธ์ทางโภชนาการได้บ้างแต่กลับปล้นชิงอิสรภาพของแรงงานในการจัดการอาหารและความชอบด้านอาหารของตนเอง การสนับสนุนให้มีโรงอาหารในโรงงานเกิดขึ้นภายใต้โลกทัศน์แบบปิตาธิปไตย ซึ่งปรากฏผ่านรัฐ ภาคประชาสังคม และผู้จัดการโรงงาน ซึ่งมองว่าแรงงานในโรงงานนั้นขาดตัวแทนในการนำทางท่ามกลางระบบอาหารที่ปั่นป่วน แม้ว่าจะดูย้อนแย้ง แต่ข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ยืนยันว่าแรงงานไม่สามารถบรรลุผลลัพธ์ด้านโภชนาการที่ดีที่สุดได้ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในช่วงวัยเจริญพันธุ์ที่เปราะบาง

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ผลที่เกิดขึ้นในปัจจุบันเกิดจากการละเว้นละเลยเป็นเวลานานที่จะปรับปรุงระบบเดิมที่มีอยู่รวมทั้งขยับขยายขอบเขตและประสิทธิภาพเดิมในการเสริมพลังอำนาจให้กับแรงงาน อันนำไปสู่การที่แรงงานรู้สึกละอายใจต่อการรับประทานอาหารใกล้ประตูโรงงานหรือตลาดใกล้เคียง แทนที่จะได้รับโอกาสในการเสนอว่าระบบเหล่านี้ควรปรับปรุงอย่างไรเพื่อประโยชน์ของแรงงานเอง ซึ่งนำไปสู่การขาดความคิดสร้างสรรค์ในการแก้ไขปัญหาเพื่อใช้แนะนำและประยุกต์กับภาคการผลิตเครื่องนุ่งห่มและรองเท้า

คำสำคัญ: อาหารเขมร; อาหารชนบท-ในเมือง; วัฒนธรรมอาหาร; กัมพูชา; แรงงานในโรงงาน

Abstract

This paper departs from multi-lateral, governmental, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports and academic work in that it squarely seeks to determine how the existing systems of nutrition and food provision can play a role in improving workers health conditions. Ethnographic research method was employed to explain why the contradictory conclusions documented above arise by exploring a domain little covered by project evaluation based, technocratic research. In part, we do this by replicating the basic research methodologies used by numerous studies in evaluating the link between behavioral patterns and dietary outcomes and by triangulating these with participant observation and long-term food diaries that particularly focus on the skills and lived food environment of workers. The food systems that have developed alongside dense factory areas in the Phnom Penh metropolitan areas are not ideal from the perspective of hygiene, but they have co-evolved with factory workers and their preferences for over two decades. While external interventions, such as canteens, can achieve a marginal increase in nutrition outcomes, they also rob workers of their independence in dietary management and food preference. The consistent support for canteens is sustained by the patriarchal view, present among government, civil society, and factory managers, that factory workers lack the agency to navigate the turbulent food systems which they are faced with. Certain evidence, however contradictory, seems to confirm that workers are unable to achieve optimal dietary outcomes, especially during vulnerable “child-bearing years”. The long-term result has been a disregard for interventions that might improve the existing system and leverage its inherent efficiencies and scope for empowering workers. The extent of this disregard is such that factory workers are meant to feel ashamed for eating food near the factory gates or nearby markets, rather than given a chance to articulate how these systems could be improved for their benefit. This leads to a lack of creativity in the range of solutions suggested and adopted in the garment and footwear sector.

Keywords: Khmer cuisine; Rural-urban dietary; Food culture; Cambodian; Factory workers

Introduction

The driving force behind improvements to conditions in ‘sweat shops’ in poorer countries have been based on the presumption that the necessary interventions are primarily needed *at the workplaces* in question. The dominant narrative understood by international audiences, particularly among those who put pressure on brand names, is that factory conditions are hot and cramped, and

that workers toil for long hours for low wages. It follows that factories should become better ventilated, overtime working hours should be optional, and that wages should simply rise. Since the International Labor Organization's (ILO) 'Better Factories Cambodia' (BFC) initiative began in 2001, all of these things have occurred and yet the condition of factory workers in the garment and footwear sector remains a chronic point of concern and national fixation. Two areas have attracted special attention in the national dialogue: health and safety, and nutrition. And in these areas as well, pressure has been imposed on the garment sector to manage the safety of factory workers at home and enroute to work, to manage health and maternal care, and to support a nutritious diet. A certain ideal seems to surround this push, centered around visions of a gleaming factory with on-site health services, free food canteens, and worker transportation via air-conditioned bus from safe housing estates. The supporting assumption is that a centralized, regulated, and systematized system attached to factories would be more efficient and effective than the inconsistent domain of private service provision outside the factory gates. There is some evidence that when these services are internalized by factories, the workers well-being rises, but few have compared whether the "chaotic" private sector is, on balance, the optimal place for intervention—especially given the recalcitrance of most factories toward long-term structural changes. This paper departs from multi-lateral, governmental, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports and academic work in that it squarely seeks to determine how the existing systems of nutrition and food provision can play a role in improving workers health conditions.

One driver of this research is the observation that the factory sector is in a constant state of flux on which it is difficult to impose health and nutrition rationality, while other forms of service provision are comparable and consistent across neighborhoods and industrial estates in Cambodia. Optimizing the workability of factory workers' fresh markets, lunch vendors, and food stalls would have a more universally-felt effect not only for workers but within the broader industrial working and living space. Beyond this are potential knock-on effects, including better domestic and cooking skills, better financial management, and more independence to customize one's nutritional lifestyle. The impacts are potentially significant for Cambodia's middle-term industrial development and its post-industrial future. The ILO estimates that around 700,000 workers (out of a population of around 14 million), mostly young and female, are engaged in the garment and footwear sector – which amounts for perhaps one-quarter of all females aged 18-29 in Cambodia (Heng & Ashish, 2017a). It is therefore not surprising that, overall, most international aid funded projects have targeted maternal and sexual health (Heng & Ashish, 2017a), as there is a strong expectation that long-term family building is at stake. This target, as expressed in aid projects dealing with nutrition, have mostly focused on improving women's health for the sake of family promotion. The result is an interventionist approach that seeks firstly to improve nutrition during the critical maternal years at the cost of taking a longer-term approach which would focus more on empowering factory women to manage their own nutrition strategically and become savvy domestic managers.

The project appraisals and reports produced about nutrition in the garment and footwear sector often articulate a patriarchal discourse of innocent young women in need of protection from profiteering factory owners, unscrupulous food vendors, and their own dietary illiteracy.[2] Even the more progressive reports often gratuitously represent female factory workers as "young and from the countryside", without specifying what they wish to say by this. Similarly, the vulnerability of the female workers is correctly, but perhaps overzealously, invoked by regularly mentioning that they are in their "child-bearing years". This constellation of characteristics serves to deny agency to the workers while creating a justification for structural intervention. One example of this is the preoccupation with factory canteens. Despite the decline in the number of canteens and the persistence of major structural impediments to their use (BDLINK & HRINC, 2012), policy recommendations typically refer to them as the ideal solution for workers (Angkor Research, 2016; Ashish, 2017; Becker, 2012; CARE International, 2006). The implication is that the food systems internal to the targets (i.e. the factory workers' own domestic and food skills) and externally (i.e. the food vendors, fresh markets, and stalls) are sub-optimal spaces for intervention. In short, factory workers' dietary skills are not consistent and vendors cannot be trustworthy. This paper does not seek to contradict the well-documented nutritional challenges facing factory workers, but to avoid the trap of seeking *a priori* top-down interventions.

Factory workers in the lens of development aid

Consistent with the experience of industrialization in most countries, factory workers in Cambodia typically transition from farm homes to cramped slum areas where basic amenities, including kitchens and running water, cannot be taken for granted. Most typically, young female workers reside in a single room with an improvised cooking area made up of a camping stove, wood block, and set of crockery. Many have disrupted school and domestic education to migrate to the city and may lack comprehensive cooking and life skills. While this set of conditions might suggest ominous nutritional outcomes, our research in a number of factory worker areas in the greater Phnom Penh area has uncovered a more optimistic state of affairs. This research draws on surveys, food diaries, and itinerant research among factory workers to illustrate how the social modeling in migration, the food spaces around factories, and ingenuity combine to create a lived environment with surprisingly high nutritional potential. This is not to say that factory workers' health and hygiene are necessarily good, as indeed many migrants struggle to adopt optimal dietary behavior, but rather to suggest that nutritional outcomes are better than expected and can often be quite good. Even as the ILO/BFC and other aid agencies tend to skirt around the dietary potential of the existing factory food environment by focusing on external forms of intervention, they often stumble upon the positive aspects of the internal system.

[2]Without specifying further, we reviewed the completed and ongoing evaluations from the following projects: HealthWorks (2012-present), funded by USAID); Healthy Food, Healthy Workplace (2016-2019), funded by The Children's Place, administered by CARE; Life Skills (2012), funded by ILO, administered by World Education; Better Factories Cambodia's Nutrition Program (ongoing), funded by the US Department of Labor

Certain aspects of the routine, lived dietary experience have been well documented in reports by consulting and aid agency reports, but it is necessary to go beyond the technocratic scope of most of these evaluations in order to understand the context for dietary agency among factory workers. As a starting point, the most recent controlled study of impact of factory canteens (Angkor Research, 2016) ultimately endorses canteens but the contradictory tone apparent in the recommendations reveals a more ambivalent conclusion.

> "Improvements in workers' understanding of positive health behaviours, including how to make appropriate food choices for better health and nutrition, would help workers to make positive changes *in their own lives over the long term, and would also benefit their children and other family members*." (Angkor Research, 2016, p. 27, emphasis added)

Contrary to popular imagination, they find that workers' Body Mass Index (BMI) is not dissimilar to that of the overall Cambodian population, and that factory workers actually had an "acceptable amount of dietary diversity" when eating independently (Angkor Research, 2016, p. 7). Instead of forcefully and exclusively pushing for canteens, they recommend a combination of trainings on food diversity, nutrition, and hygiene, as well as more eggs, dairy, and foods rich in vitamin A and iron. In evaluating existing canteens, they suggest that the food be more culturally appropriate and that providing sufficient food choice is important for uptake – in other words, to render the food experience more similar to typical private dietary habits. This subtly watered-down endorsement of canteens is not unusual among the most recent research, and yet subjective support for canteens remains high. This is apparent in follow-up studies measuring the base level nutrient status of factory workers (Makurat et al., 2016) and the actual nutritive value of canteen food (Makurat et al. 2017), which show that while canteen food is generally healthier, it is still often deficient in critical nutrients such as iron. In contrast to the Angkor Research study, they conclude that BMI is unhealthily low (using an absolute rather than absolute metric) and that vitamin A levels are acceptable among workers. These inconsistent findings and the lukewarm validation of the canteen solution suggest that the nutrition challenges facing workers go beyond food access and security.

Factory workers in an ethnographic lens

Our research seeks to explain why the contradictory conclusions documented above arise by exploring a domain little covered by project evaluation based, technocratic research. In part, we do this by replicating the basic research methodologies used by numerous studies in evaluating the link between behavioral patterns and dietary outcomes (BDLINK & HRINC, 2012; i.e. CARE International, 2006; Heng & Ashish, 2017b), and by triangulating these with participant observation and long-term food diaries that particularly focus on the skills and lived food environment of workers.

In addition to a survey of 'dietary history' and routine food consumption patterns[3], we follow up with key informants by developing sufficient rapport that we may visit their rental rooms for an impromptu meal and then follow-up with a visit to their provincial hometowns to further explore their cooking background. This methodology was inspired by previous work on the value of informal urban food institutions in Cambodia (Feuer, 2015) and Vietnam (Vansintjan, 2017), as well as the early, anecdotal project documentation of the impressive food skills of many workers. Vansintjan (2017) effectively captured our initial impressions with his representation of Vietnamese street food:

> *"Street vendors rarely have fridges, nor do they have large cooking surfaces, dishwashing machines, or ovens. By and large, they make do with some knives, two bowls to wash fresh vegetables in, a large pot, a frying pan, coals or gas burners and — for products that may go bad during the day — fermentation. Having limited access to capital and consumer electronics, these vendors — most often women — ply their trade in a way that has stood the test of time."*

The food preparation conditions of factory workers are also very rudimentary (see Figure 1), but in many ways comparable to their hometown counterparts (see Figure 2). The transferability of certain food preparation skills – such as the effective employment of very basic equipment - can explain why have consistently we experienced thoughtful, hygienic and efficiently-prepared meals (see Figure 3). Given the good availability and proximity of fresh markets to most high-density factory areas, workers can be said to have more consistent access to a wider variety of ingredients than in their hometowns. As a result, factory workers with sufficient cooking and domestic planning skills are also frequently able to coordinate the preparation of breakfast and a packed-lunch (44% do so at least a few times per week), despite having very little time before and after work (typically 07:00-17:00 shifts, with bedtime around 21:00) to complete cooking and all other domestic duties. This phenomenon summarized well by a factory worker from Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district,

> *"Growing up, my sister was not so interested to help in the kitchen. She is now having a hard time to manage living on her own, and she calls me for advice all the time. As for me, you see, I live alone but I make good food every day. It's not hard if you make it a habit. […] I plan my dinner to have leftovers for lunch – you see this blue container from [the factory]? I use this to bring lunch almost every day."* (female, age 31, from Kompong Som province)

[3]The sample size is 77 workers from 5 factories in different regions in the metropolitan Phnom Penh area. They informants were selected randomly when exiting the factory gate in the evening and those with literacy impediments were given the survey orally. As described in the report from CARE International (2006), this cannot be considered a robust randomization procedure but balances the constraints of the working environment.

Figure 1 The rental room kitchen of female factory worker A.

Figure 2 The hometown kitchen of a female factory worker A.

Figure 3 The dinner of female factory worker B.

By our measure, this worker represents the 28% of workers who have comprehensive cooking skills and are able to use these to manage their dietary lifestyle efficiently. Given that an additional 66% of workers can cook most everyday Khmer dishes (including all male informants), the potential for employing independent skills to effectively manage one's nutrition remains high. Furthermore, when working in groups, gaps in dietary skill can be remedied and dietary diversity can be increased significantly. As documented by most of the evaluations and reports summarized above, and confirmed in our research, most factory workers live with others (usually family), with an average household size of three (Angkor Research, 2016). By coordinating differences in their work schedules and cooking skills, they can very efficiently prepare nutritionally comprehensive meals. Khmer cuisine is particularly suited to such shared arrangements, as many of the healthiest dishes require group eating (Feuer, 2015).

Beyond the household, factory workers consistently share food with others at the factory (88% of the time). This not only allows a more relaxed, convivial break, but facilitates food sharing and dietary diversity. We have documented groups of between 3-6 workers eating together, sharing between 4 and 12 dishes. A particular form of this behavior emerges among factory comrades who delegate the responsibility of buying food for the group to those who are particularly adept at selecting a balanced and hygienic meal from among the myriad options outside the gate (see Figure 4). This ideal case, however, must be viewed in the broader context of food in front of the factory gate. While the variety of low-cost food near factory areas is often impressive due to the entrepreneurship of the vendors, there are two main weaknesses in the current system: hygiene and temptation. While our research confirms that the vast majority of workers consume a typical Khmer meal of rice (99%), somlor (stew) (60%-98%), and stir-fried foods (36-97%), we also know that

unhealthy choices are common as well: artificial fish balls (55-65%), milky desserts (33-80%), salted clams (30%), and all manner of sugary drinks (cane juice, soda, lemonade) are very common complementary additions. In general, those with longer tenures at the factories purchase less unhealthy options from the factory gate (declines are particularly noticeable for fish balls, clams, and sugary drinks). One common explanation for this phenomenon relates to unsteady expectations about one's job outlook:

Figure 4 An arrangement of soups, fried dishes, pickles, and rice for quick sale in front of a garment factory.

"I'm unsure how long I will stay at the factory, so for now I do not worry about my health. But if I plan to work for a long time, I may have to change" (female, age 24, from Prey Veng province).

Most long-term workers we interviewed suggested that, at first, they too believed that they would only work for a year or two. This belief belies the statistical evidence and realities around working periods. Since garment workers typically send around $25 home per month (ADB, 2014), and this amount is not sufficient to improve conditions noticeably in one or two years, it is common for workers to indefinitely extend their sojourn. And indeed, the average worker often stays for an average of 5 years (our research and Angkor Research, 2016, p. 11), with a median of 3.5 years. Over this period, workers can improve their independent cooking skills, domestic management, and gain discipline. An earlier report goes into some depth about this topic by researching the differences between factory workers' and managers' views about diet (BDLINK & HRINC, 2012). They find an interesting divergence, in which workers tend to view their nutrition choices as their own domain and responsibility, while managers feel that they should intervene but are hamstrung by factory-level and other constraints.

Conclusion

The food systems that have developed alongside dense factory areas in the Phnom Penh metropolitan area are not ideal from the perspective of hygiene, but they have co-evolved with factory workers and their preferences for over two decades. While external interventions, such as canteens, can achieve a marginal increase in nutrition outcomes, they also rob workers of their independence in dietary management and food preference. The consistent support for canteens is sustained by the patriarchal view, present among government, civil society, and factory managers, that factory workers lack the agency to navigate the turbulent food systems which they are faced with. Certain evidence, however contradictory, seems to confirm that workers are unable to achieve optimal dietary outcomes, especially during vulnerable “child-bearing years”. The long-term result has been a disregard for interventions that might improve the existing system and leverage its inherent efficiencies and scope for empowering workers. The extent of this disregard is such that factory workers are meant to feel ashamed for eating food near the factory gates or nearby markets, rather than given a chance to articulate how these systems could be improved for their benefit. This leads to a lack of creativity in the range of solutions suggested and adopted in the garment and footwear sector.

This paper has provided the preliminary case for how the inherent food skills are already the backbone of worker nutrition and how they can continue to be indispensable, especially when expressed in group effort. Workers themselves, when given the chance, express their desire to maintain independence and responsibility over their dietary lifestyles. In this, there is an opportunity to push for empowerment of workers to continuously refine these skills to help manage the challenges of hygiene, micronutrient intake, and rising food costs. This would not only help raise productivity, alleviate ongoing nutrition-based health problems, but would set workers on a path to lifelong cooking and domestic management skills that will benefit not only them but their future families. Although there are few innovative examples of how such empowerment would be shaped, a few factories have stumbled upon promising solutions and a few observers have made important suggestions. Among these are working closely with vendors to set baseline standards for hygiene, inviting vendors into factory gates to create informal ‘food courts’ that avoid unsafe, dusty roads, and providing healthy snacks (such as bananas) to increase the probability that workers are driven by choice rather than hunger. Outside of the factory, it is important to support rather than demonize the fresh market and food systems that have evolved with workers; instead, it is important to recognize their strengths and work to minimize their weaknesses. These spaces, which are the facilitators to independent dietary learning, are inescapably part of the present and future facing urban workers in the next generation.

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